

**Elgin Middle School
Elgin Public Schools
Elgin, Oklahoma**



“Recognition, Rewards, and Relationships”: Keeping Middle School Students Motivated

Angela Cordes, Guidance Counselor and Assistant Principal

The three R’s concept, which is Relationship, Rewards, and Recognition, wasn’t necessarily something we started out as a—“here’s this new program”; it was more of, “what do you need to help your children succeed?” We kept throwing around these ideas and kept coming up with the same words: “It is all about the relationship you have with your kids.” It is all about rewarding them and not disciplining them or taking things away from them when they don’t do something.

Heather Ballou, Eighth Grade Reading Teacher

We have things called “Owl tags,” and they get rewarded based on their student achievement. And they get them not only for being on the honor roll, so that is a quick result they get at the nine weeks. They also get rewarded based on their test scores, and so if they have a certain test score, they can get the Owl tags. Once they get a little taste of what it is like to get recognized and get rewarded for something they have noticed, it’s almost like it steps up their game in the classroom too. They then think, “Well, I got this tag for participating in a sport, or I got this tag for completing a season in band.”

Then they realize, “I could get another one if I just get on the honor roll this nine-weeks, or I could get another one if I do well on my state testing, and it’s just like once they get a taste of that little bit of recognition, they are looking for ways to earn more of those ways to be rewarded and recognized in the classroom.

Sammy Jackson, Principal

There is always a way to earn a tag. You do not have to be the fastest kid. You don’t have to be the most popular kid. You don’t have to be the smartest kid. You get a tag for having a birthday. Everybody here has a birthday so you are going to get one tag just for being born.

Student

We get these Owl Pride tags. We have a free homework pass if we get a 100 on our assignment. We have our student store where we can trade a tag in for \$3.00 to spend in the store.

Angela Cordes

I have put some in lockers with a note to say, “Great job on keeping your locker clean.” Then I stand in out the hall watching him open his locker when he finds that. You would think it was

Christmas!

Sammy Jackson

They get a tag for a random act of kindness. That if they—it doesn't matter what they did. If they open the door for you, a teacher can send him in for a random act of kindness. I have seen a kid picking up paper, they get that. And the look on their face—you can kind of help that process along because you know this kid, and you know that he needs a little boost, or you know a kid might be struggling one day or you know—that's all you have to do. Our teachers know that from their relationships they have built with them. They know things are not going well and a kid could use a silver Owl tag just for "being who you are today" and it turns their whole day around.

Student

I like Elgin because of the rewards. When you do something good, you don't just get told you did good, you get rewarded for it, like getting to go to Six Flags.

Ryan Snider, Eighth Grade History Teacher

We incorporate rewards within the classroom and of course recognition for doing good things. And one of the things that really has helped with my teaching is the relationships I have with the kids. If you can build a bond with that kid, if you can inspire them, then they will perform. Some kids will work for the reward and some kids will work for you. My experience is if you can build a relationship with a kid, that is the most important thing, because they'll do it for themselves. Because they may start out doing it for you but before long they will be doing it for themselves.

Student

I moved here in fifth grade and it was a pretty tough move for me, and I think Elgin as a whole, and the school, is a fairly open, accepting place and I think of us all as a family. I feel that the teachers really have a personal relationship with everyone and that they care in a deeper level.

Sandy DeFillipo, Sixth Grade Reading Teacher

When we present a child with a kindness tag, they brighten up a little bit and they say, "That teacher *noticed* something I did. Wow! She believes in me. I want to work hard for her." When they know we believe in them, we've won because from there it is easy. They want to succeed; they want to perform. They want to do their best for us.

Sammy Jackson

They realize that "I can be successful and I don't have to be the star all the time. I can be successful just being me." We think that if we can make middle school for them fun, and we can make school fun, and learning fun, and it's fun to be here, then they're going to high school, and when their maturity kicks in, they'll have a great attitude and be successful.